Super Specter™

The Man Who Couldn't Come Clean

by Julia Remine Piggin

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The Man Who Couldn't Come Clean

Julia Remine Piggin

FEARON EDUCATION
a division of
David S. Lake Publishers
Belmont, California

Super Specter Series

A Game of Revenge
A Guest from the Grave
The Lost One
The Man Who Couldn't Come Clean
Maze of Terror
Sometimes Nightmares Are Real

Cover design: Emily Kissin
Cover art: Dave Blanchette

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ISBN-0-8224-6403-9
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 85-050628

Printed in the United States of America
1. 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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1 Iron Hill

Iron Hill isn't the highest mountain in the world. But it's still a hard climb to the cave. You have to pick your way through sharp rocks and pine trees close together. There's no path. That's why, when we were kids, Timothy Malpas and I were the first people ever to discover the cave. At least, it seemed that way to us. There was nothing in it to show that anyone else had ever been inside. The entrance was hidden behind a kind of fold in the rock. Even after we had been there a dozen times, we sometimes missed it. It's so well covered that even somebody who needed to hide there might not find it.

But I knew Tim was hiding there. It was the only place he could be. The police had not found him anywhere else. They'd put out a radio warning to drivers not to pick Tim up. That was pretty crazy. No people in their right minds would pick Tim up, not the way he looked. They were more likely to run off the road trying to get away from him.

I had to be careful. I had to have a good story ready if a cop climbed up after me and asked me where I was going. The police didn't know who I was, of course. Except for the few seconds when I ran toward Tim through the screaming crowd, nothing tied us together. I'd been away a long time. I looked different. And nobody even thought of Tim having friends. He'd been Cornich's town horror so long that nobody remembered he'd once been human like other people.

I decided I'd tell the truth if they stopped me. I'd say I used to live around here when I was a kid. I used to climb Iron Hill and wanted to see if I still could. If they asked me if I knew Tim Malpas, I'd say, "Sure, I used to know him. But. . . ." And I'd make like I was going to be sick. "I haven't seen him in five years," I'd say,

“but even then. . . .” And I’d make some other kind of face. After all, who would be a friend of Tim Malpas’s?

I had a lot to think about as I climbed. I wasn't sure what I’d say to Tim when I found him. I could try to get him to come down and give himself up. After all, he hadn’t really done anything wrong. And then I asked myself, if I were Tim, would I care? Maddy Alder had twisted his life so out of shape. The past began to blot out the present. . . .

Tim Malpas and I grew up on the same block. We started to pal around together as soon as our mothers let us out of our yards. He was always taller than I was, and better looking. Tim was fair, thin, athletic. But I always seemed to understand things better. Tim always sort of went for what was on the surface.

But we were friends, no matter what. We were always together. We fought sometimes, but we’d lie for each other if we had to. One day when we were about 12, we decided to climb Iron Hill.

It was about a week after Tim’s father had

been killed in a factory accident. Tim needed to discover or conquer something. That's when we found the cave.

After that, we weren't just friends. We were boys who had a secret nobody else knew about. We used to go up there every week or so. There were a lot of big, cold rooms, and we'd wander through them. We felt like explorers.

My mom would make us some sandwiches, and we'd pack a tin cup, too. There was a little stream that ran through the cave. The water was colder than any cold I've ever known. But we'd drink it, even though it hurt our teeth. It didn't taste like any other water, anywhere. We never told anybody about the cave. We just said we went to the top of Iron Hill and ate and came down again.

Tim and I stayed friends all through grade school and into high school. By that time, Tim was sort of a jock. He was a member of the basketball team, a star tennis player, and captain of the swimming team. Girls liked him, more than me. But I didn't care. Dawn liked me, and that was all I cared about.

The year we were seniors in high school, Maddy Alder moved to town. There were all

kinds of rumors about her and her family. People said they were refugees from some country in Eastern Europe. They were supposed to have millions. Well, they did live in a big old house in the best part of town, but you didn't really need millions for that.

All I knew was that Maddy was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. But there was something about her that scared me from the beginning. She was like somebody carved out of amber. Glowing, and warm and shining. But old, dead things are trapped in amber. And I always felt that there were some old, awful things somewhere deep in Maddy Alder.

Tim Malpas didn't feel that way, though. All he saw was the glow and beauty every other guy in school saw. They all wanted to go out with Maddy. But for some reason, she usually said yes when Tim asked her.

Dawn and I double-dated with them one night. We went to a concert and then for something to eat at the Roma Cafe. The Roma was a little too rich for my wallet. But Tim had to impress Maddy, so I went along. I knew it would take my allowance and the money from my Saturday job at the dry cleaner's for a

month. But I didn't want to let Tim down. He made money giving tennis lessons to young kids, and I figured he was spending his month's wages, too.

While we were waiting at our table for the check, a short, bald man came in. He started to walk across the big restaurant to a table in the corner. Maddy looked at him and said, "Want to see me make him stumble?" Dawn laughed, and so did I, but it was nervous laughter. Tim looked proud. "Sure, Maddy, go ahead," he said.

Maddy turned her head and looked hard at the man. Just a look, nothing else. But suddenly, he stumbled. He grabbed the back of a chair to steady himself. A waiter rushed over and said, "Are you all right, sir?" The man nodded that he was OK. But what had happened? He looked at the floor to see if he'd tripped over anything. There was nothing there. He looked worried.

"I'll bet he goes to his doctor for a checkup tomorrow," Tim said. Maddy laughed. Not a giggle, but a deep, cold laugh. I shivered.

Dawn looked scared. She put her hand in mine, and said, "I'm ready to go home."

2 Prom Night

Maddy Alder must have had at least ten invitations to the senior prom. But she accepted Tim's. Again, I couldn't understand why. Tim was tall and good-looking. But there were other better-looking guys. And he didn't have the kind of money she was used to.

"So, she likes me," Tim said when I brought the subject up. "You've got some kind of complex. You don't think you're any good, so anybody who's your friend can't be any good, either. Well, I'm just as good as any guy Maddy goes out with, and she knows it."

It wasn't true. I didn't think I wasn't any good. But I was used to the nasty cracks Tim made sometimes. So I just shrugged it off.

8

We were all going to the dance in Tim's car. First, he picked me up, then Dawn, and then we went over to get Maddy. Dawn looked lovely in a blue dress. Pretty and bright, but not mysterious in any way. Part of all the things I knew and understood. I remember how she looked that night when she came down the stairs at her house. I remember because after that night nothing would ever be the same for any of us again. The picture of her wearing that blue dress and the gold locket I'd given her for her birthday has always stayed in my mind. Everything good. No shadows, then.

We drove to the rich part of town, and pulled up outside Maddy's house. We were right on time. Tim turned off the motor and started to open the car door. "Be right back," he said. He got out into the street.

Maddy's front door opened, and she stepped out onto the porch. She was wearing a long, green dress. Over it, open so you could see the dress under it, was a long, green velvet cape. Her hair shone. Her face glowed. And she was smiling at the man holding her arm.

It was Nick St. Clair. He'd been a football star at our school as a senior the year before.

He was dressed to take Maddy Alder to the dance.

For a second, Tim just stood there beside the car. Then, he walked over to the curb. For the first time, Maddy seemed to see him. “Tim,” she said, as if she hadn't seen him in months and was so glad he’d dropped by. “Oh, Tim. I know you won't mind. Nick's taking me to the dance.”

Dawn gasped. I didn’t know what to do. Neither, for a minute, did Tim. He looked at Maddy, in her fancy green dress and cape, and her smiling traitor's face. Then, he slowly walked over to the green lawn. It had rained that afternoon. The pavements were dry, but the earth was still wet. Tim bent down and dug his fingers into the soil. He straightened up. There was a lump of dark, oozing mud in his hand.

“Oh, Tim, don’t,” Dawn cried. But Tim didn’t hear her. Almost in slow motion, he lifted the lump of mud and threw it at Maddy. It splattered her chin and the front of her green dress, and stuck to the velvet cape.

Nick St. Clair lunged at Tim. But Maddy jumped in front of him. “I’ll handle it,” she

said. Her face changed. I don't know how to describe it. All I could think of was a skull with a candle inside it. Her eyes looked like dark holes with fire burning behind them. They fixed on Tim. And she said something in a language I'd never heard before. The words were low and hard, and yet they sounded like some kind of strange poetry. Tim stood as if he couldn't move. The mud still dripped from his hands.

It was a scene with time twisted around it. It lasted for. . . . It could have been a second, or an hour. Or simply until Maddy broke it. Her face was suddenly soft and golden and sweet again. She looked up at Nick and smiled.

"I'll go back and get into my rose-colored dress," she said. "It won't take a minute. Come on, you can talk to my father about football while I wash this off and start over." Nick hesitated. He still wanted to clobber Tim. It was in his face. But he turned and followed Maddy back through the door.

Tim still stood there. I climbed out and went over and put my hand on his shoulder. "Come on, pal," I said. Dawn had gotten out of the car, too. She opened her little evening purse and

got out a tissue.

"Here," she said, "wipe your hands on this." Tim took the tissue and wiped his hands. But the mud wouldn't come off. "You need soap and water," Dawn said. "Do you want to . . . ?" She looked at me. We had really looked forward to the dance. Did we still want to go? I wasn't sure.

"I'll drive you to the school," Tim said. "Then I'll go home . . . or somewhere."

We hardly spoke in the car as he drove us to the dance. All I could see were his dirty hands on the white steering wheel. We got out in front of the school, and Tim drove away. Dawn and I went in. Everything inside was happy and should have been magic. But not for us. We danced once. Then, Dawn pulled at my arm. "Look," she said.

Maddy Alder and Nick St. Clair were coming into the hall. Maddy was wearing a rose-colored dress under another cape that matched. She looked perfect and calm and she was smiling. Of course, heads turned to look at her. She was, I say even now, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. But that night I looked at her and felt as if the icy water from the

spring in the cave had been thrown on me. I looked down at Dawn. Her eyes were wide and full of fear.

"Jeff, let's go," she said. "I think if she spoke to me I'd . . . die." We sneaked out of the gym like criminals. We had no car, so we began to walk. After a while, we stopped in a burger place and tried to eat something. But it wasn't any good. We couldn't swallow, and we couldn't seem to talk to each other. Both of us knew that something a lot bigger had happened than a high school kid throwing mud on a girl's dress. We didn't know what it was. But we were afraid.

I took Dawn home. Then, I walked to my house and tried to sneak upstairs. "What happened?" my mother called from the living room as I went through the hall. "Why are you home so early?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said. I figured she'd think I had a fight with Dawn. I couldn't tell anybody what had happened because I didn't know.

Next morning, about 7:30, the phone rang. I knew who it was. I almost didn't want to answer it. I didn't want whatever was going to

happen to start. When I heard Tim's voice, I knew it already had.

"Can you come over right away?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Soon as I can get dressed." I went upstairs, took off my pajamas, and pulled on some jeans and a shirt. I went out and got on my bike and rode over to Tim's. He was waiting at the door and let me in.

"Look," he said and held up his hands. They were covered with the dark, dried mud from Maddy Alder's lawn. "I scrubbed them five times with lava soap. It won't come off."

I looked at his hands and felt the way I'd felt the night before. As if the icy water from the cave had been dumped on me. "Aw, come on, Tim," I managed to say. "There must be some kind of stain or something in that mud. It'll have to wear off, that's all."

"No, that's not all," Tim said. "Look at this." He peeled off his T-shirt. On his back was a shiny red spot. I thought it was blood. Then I saw that it was strawberry jam. "My sister was in a hurry this morning. We were in the kitchen and she dropped her toast on me. The jam went through my shirt. I've taken two showers. It won't come off either."

"Look," I said, scrambling for something to say, "there's got to be a reason. I mean, a sensible reason. Something's the matter with your skin. You have to go to a doctor. Maybe there's not enough oil in your skin, or something." For a second, there was a flash of hope in Tim's eyes.

"Let's get the yellow pages," he said.

We found the telephone book and turned to the lists of doctors. For a while we couldn't remember what kind of doctor treats skin problems. We finally came up with *dermatologist*. There weren't too many in our town, and we didn't know anything about the few there were.

"I'll shut my eyes and put my finger on a name," Tim said. He looked very frightened. "You do it," he said.

I shut my eyes and stabbed at the yellow page. The name I picked was a Dr. N. D. Solloway. "Want me to call?" I asked.

"No one will be there at eight in the morning," Tim said. "But what'll I do? I don't want my mother to see this. She's still asleep. My sister was in a rush to go on her picnic. All she said was, 'Yuck, wash your hands, you

bum,' and forgot all about it. But Mom. . . ."

"Let's take a chance," I said. I dialed the doctor's number. A nurse, or a secretary or somebody answered. They had early office hours. And there was an appointment open in the afternoon.

"The doctor will see you at two," the woman said. "The name?"

"Tim—Tim Miller," I said. "See you at two." I don't know why I thought I should give a false name. It just came out, as if hiding and being ashamed were natural. Again, I had the feeling that something had started that couldn't be stopped.

Tim looked at the kitchen clock. "It's only eight-thirty. What can we—I—do until two?" He would never have changed *we* to *I* before. I wasn't ready for that—yet. All my friendship and loyalty surged to the surface.

"We can . . . well, how about going up to the cave?" I said. "We haven't been up there in a long time."

"OK," Tim said.

Out in the spring air, struggling up Iron Hill, the world was good and more familiar. But when we found the entrance to the cave and

stepped inside, the shadow fell again. The cave was different. It wasn't anything you could see. The stream still foamed in its rough little bed. The echoing stone rooms stretched, one after the other, into the heart of the hill. But it wasn't the same. It was as if an ugly, angry presence had stirred up the still, cold air. That doesn't make much sense, I know. It's not easy to describe what you can't see, hear, smell, or touch.

Tim didn't feel it as much as I did, for he had a sudden burning idea. "Jeff! Suppose I dip my hands in the stream and they come clean? Just suppose that's the medicine I need!" He walked to the little thread of water and knelt beside it.

I didn't know whether I wanted him to dip his hands in the water or not. Part of me hoped the water would wash the mud away. Part of me was so afraid it wouldn't work that I didn't want Tim to try it. Another voice inside me said the words I hated myself for thinking, "If he touches that water, it'll never be fit to drink again." Tim, my oldest friend. The nearest thing I had to a brother. "Try it," I said, to shut off my thoughts. "But don't be disappointed if

it doesn't work."

He held out his hands. Then he lowered them into the water. The stream churned over them. I knew it was bone chilling. But Tim held his hands there until he couldn't stand it another second. He closed his eyes and pulled his hands out. My eyes weren't closed. They saw what Tim didn't want to see. The mud was still on his skin.

I thought he was going to cry when he finally looked. "Tim, there's no way it could've worked," I said, trying to find something to make it easier to bear. "1 told you, it's your skin. You need pills, or sunlamp treatments, or maybe an operation. The doctor will know. At two o'clock you'll be on the way to getting over it." I said it, but I didn't believe it. And neither did Tim.

3 A Doctor Without a Cure

Dr. Solloway turned out to be a young woman, smooth and very cheerful. If you'd said, "I cut off my head by mistake," she'd probably have said, "Oh, don't worry about a thing. I've got a new head here that will just fit you." But she frowned when she saw Tim's hands and back.

She asked Tim how he got his hands dirty in the first place. Tim shot me a glance. He said, "1 picked up some mud to see if the grass was dry." What could he have said? "Somebody put a curse on me?" He told the whole truth about the strawberry jam. I could tell the doctor was stumped. She got some super-strong soap and scrubbed Tim's hands and back with a brush.

The mud and jam were still there when she finished. She put Tim's hands under a hot lamp. Nothing happened. Then, she began to ask questions about Tim's life, at home, at school. How did he get along with girls? "She thinks Tim's nuts," I thought. But even if you're nuts, why can't you wash your hands?

She had let me go into the examining room with Tim. I knew I should have kept my mouth shut. But I wanted to ask a question. "Have you ever seen anything like this before, Doctor?" I asked. She gave me a sharp look.

"Yes," she said, "as a matter of fact I have. And I gave the person the same medicine I'm going to give your friend."

"Did it help?" Tim asked.

"I think so," Dr. Solloway laughed. "At least the patient never came back. That's a pretty good sign."

I wondered if it was a good sign. The doctor got up and called her nurse. They went into the next room and closed the door. I couldn't hear their voices too well. I walked over and stood close to the door. The words still weren't clear.

But I heard *hysterical derma*-something, and *placebo*.

Later I found out that a placebo is something doctors give you that really has no medicine in it. You think you're taking medicine, so your mind heals you. I found out, too, that a hysterical sickness is caused by your mind. But that day in Dr. Solloway's office, I didn't know that. She came out with a bottle of little green pills. I thought she really had figured out what was wrong with Tim.

"Take two of these three times a day," she said cheerily. "If your skin doesn't clear up in a week, call for another appointment."

Tim quickly grabbed the pill bottle. "Can I take some now?" he asked.

"Of course," Dr. Solloway smiled. She went to a water cooler and filled a paper cup for Tim. He gulped down two of the pills. Then he started to hand the cup back to her. She stood aside and let him drop the dirty fingerprinted object in the wastebasket himself.

"Next week is graduation," Tim said on the way home. "Maybe I'll be able to go." I'd forgotten about that. He couldn't graduate in a cap and gown and take hold of a diploma with

dried mud on his hands.

"Sure, you'll be OK by then," I said, as if I meant it.

The pills didn't work, of course. On graduation day, Tim's hands were as filthy as ever. I went over to his house after dinner. By now, his mother was a nervous wreck over his hands. She'd called Dr. Solloway, their family doctor, and everybody else she could think of. She didn't know about the night of the dance, though, or about what Tim and Maddy Alder had done to each other. Tim had made me promise on my life that I wouldn't tell her. And Dawn had promised on hers that she wouldn't talk to anyone about it. It scared her too much anyway.

They were using some new soap on Tim's hands when I got there. By now, Tim knew it wouldn't work. But his mother had to keep trying. Tim turned to me as she scrubbed his hands over a basin on the kitchen table. "What am I going to do?" he pleaded.

As I had so many times before, I just began to talk, hoping some light would turn on as the words spilled out. This time, one did. "There are two things," I said. "You can use some of

your sister's makeup. Or you can wear thin rubber gloves. Maybe that would be best. If you keep your hands out of sight, nobody will notice. How about if I go over to the supermarket and get you a pair?"

Before Mrs. Malpas could say a word, I ducked out the back door and ran to the market. I picked out a pair of rubber gloves in a man's size. Then I went over to the wall where they had lipstick and other packages of makeup hanging on a peg board. I grabbed a small bottle of makeup and then almost ran to the checkout counter. With the bottle and the gloves I dashed back to the Malpases'.

Tim was drying his hands on a towel. They were still muddy. He had his shirt off. The glob of strawberry jam still glistened on his back like blood. I saw that there was something else, too. He'd forgotten to use a straw to drink his orange juice one morning. A line of orange decorated his upper lip. Like the mud and the jam, it wouldn't wash off. I was glad I'd bought the makeup.

The gloves fit. They were skintight, and if you didn't know, you probably wouldn't have noticed them for quite a while. Tim couldn't

put the makeup on his upper lip with his rubber fingers. So his mother stroked it on. It matched pretty well. And the idea of Tim in makeup struck us all funny. For the first time in more than a week, we actually laughed. The fight wasn't over. But we thought we'd won a round.

Tim and I drove to Civic Hall, where graduation was to be held. In a big back room, all the guys were putting on their caps and gowns. The girls were getting dressed in another room. I got in front of Tim so that nobody could see the gloves. The gown was just what he needed. The sleeves came down over his hands.

Then Mrs. Saunders walked in. She was a vice-principal. It was her job to see that everyone had the flat-board caps on straight, and the gowns zipped up right. And she did her job well. She made us line up and inspected each graduating senior like an army sergeant. Tim Malpas, too. "Take your hands out of

those pockets," she barked at him when she came down our line. "Are you going to march in with your hands in the pockets of your gown?" She reached over and pulled at Tim's

arm. And she saw the glove on his hand.

I thought she was going to explode. “Rubber gloves!” she screamed. “What in—young man, you take off those gloves right now or you won’t get your diploma! What kind of a joke is this?”

Tim froze. I stepped out of line. “Mrs. Saunders,” I said, “he can’t. The doctor said he had to wear them. He’s got . . . something wrong with his skin.”

“That is absurd,” Mrs. Saunders snapped. “If there is something I should know, let me see it. Take off those gloves, Timothy.”

Tim had had all he could take. He ripped the gloves off his hands. All the kids gasped in shock. Mrs. Saunders gasped, too.

“There,” Tim yelled, waving his filthy hands in her face. “Are you satisfied, you nosy old cow?”

Maybe at some schools you could get away with calling the vice-principal an old cow. Not at ours. Mrs. Saunders swelled up like a balloon. She seemed to double in size. “Get out of this room, Timothy Malpas,” she commanded. “Take off that cap and gown. I don’t care what’s wrong with you. Until you

get that diploma, you're still a student, and you're expelled!"

"Please, Mrs. Saunders," I began. She glared at me.

"Do you want to go, too?" She asked loudly.

Tim shook his head. He was stepping out of the gown, dirtying it as he touched it. He dropped it on the floor. "Forget it, Jeff," he said. And he walked out of the room. The rubber gloves and the cap and gown lay on the floor at Mrs. Saunders's feet.

I knew that down the hall, in another room, Maddy Alder was about to walk out, clean and glowing like a pearl, in her shadow-gray cap and gown.

The next morning, the story about Tim was all over town. We had one more day of school, to clean out our lockers, get autographs in our yearbooks, and say good-bye. Everyone who came up to me started with, "Hey, what's the matter with Tim?" Most of the kids liked the bit about telling off Mrs. Saunders. But by now, the news was around that Tim's hands were dirty with dried blood, even that he had always had artificial hands. I straightened it out as best I could. Luckily, I could tell a lot of the

truth. He had something wrong with his skin, I said, and he was going to a doctor. Mrs. Saunders had no right to keep him from graduating.

All the kids agreed. Janine Molla, our class president, went into the school office and got one of the secretaries to type up a petition. We protested Mrs. Saunders's action, it said. And we demanded that Timothy Malpas receive his diploma in a special ceremony. I knew Janine wanted to stay president for just a little longer as much as she wanted to help Tim. But I signed, and so did almost everybody else.

Two students didn't. One of them was Maddy Alder. She didn't even see the petition. She was gone by the time it got started. Her father's chauffeur had come to school with her. The rest of us were in jeans. She wore a short white and purple dress and high heeled shoes. Her outfit must have cost as much as my dad's pay for a month. The chauffeur had taken everything out of her locker and carried it out to their Rolls. Maddy had smiled at all the kids who saw her, waved good-bye, and left. But she *had* spoken to one of us.

I was putting my name on Janine's petition

when Dawn came up to me. I looked at her face and saw nothing but fear. How many times do you see people you know very frightened? If you count them, not very many. I'd seen Dawn scared a lot of times lately.

"Dawn," Janine said, sounding like someone running for office, "you'll want to sign this, of course. It's for Tim Malpas. You know him."

Dawn shook her head. "Janine, I can't sign anything," she said. "Please don't try to make me. Jeff, I have to talk to you."

Janine arched her eyebrows and raised her shoulders. She walked away. Dawn clutched my arm. "Maddy," she said. "I was cleaning out my locker. She came over."

Maddy had walked down the hall with the chauffeur behind her. Dawn had tried to keep her back turned as if she didn't see. But Maddy touched her shoulder. Her eyes were old, Dawn said, and wise. They held Dawn's, the way snakes' eyes are supposed to in old stories "Dawn," Maddy said in her silky voice, "it is sometimes wise not to share what you know."

Dawn said she was so weak that she had to hold onto the locker door. Dawn isn't a saint,

or a hero. I didn't blame her for saying what she did. "Maddy," she said, "I think Tim was wrong. If he's being punished . . . he deserves it. I won't say anything. Not to anybody."

Maddy smiled. A sunny, innocent smile. "That's wonderful, Dawn," she said. "Wisdom can make you very happy." She raised her hand. There wasn't much light in the hall. But her hand was like glass. Dawn could see all the veins and bones. Maddy traced a star in the air. Then she nodded to the chauffeur. They walked away.

"You see," Dawn said to me, "I can't sign anything. I . . . I sort of promised."

4 The Last Date

Tim hid up in his room most of that summer. I kept buying him rubber gloves at the supermarket, and he wore them to eat. He, his mother, and his sister would eat in almost total silence—as quickly as possible, Tim told me. Then, he'd go back upstairs and watch TV or listen to music.

In the meantime the school board read the petition, bawled out Mrs. Saunders, and sent Tim his diploma. Nothing was ever said about that special ceremony. And by now, the whole town knew about Tim's hands. The whole town meant girls, too. Tim liked girls. What

happened with Maddy had taken his mind off them, of course. But sitting there in his room, he began to think he'd like to date again. "I could wear makeup and gloves," he said to me one day. "After all, it's supposed to be personality that counts, isn't it? There was a girl in my math class. Grace something—I know, Grace Blanchard. She wasn't beautiful, but she was nice. I think I'll call her."

He took the telephone book and started thumbing through the B's. He wasn't wearing his gloves, and he got dirt all over the book. It was an impossible idea. But what could I say? I squirmed in my chair as he dialed the number. Grace's father must have answered. He asked who Tim was. Tim gave his name. Then, he got cold feet. He held the phone out to me. "You talk to her," he said. "Say you're me." A few weeks ago Tim Malpas would have had the courage to ask any girl in the world for a date. Now, I took the phone while he waited like a frightened child in the corner.

I heard a man say, "Gracie, it's somebody named Tim Malpas."

"What?" a girl's voice said. "Tim Malpas? Oh, Dad, you're kidding."

"Why should I be kidding? That's what he said his name was. Don't you want to talk to him?" the man asked.

"Dad, no. He's the guy who never washes his hands. Tell him I'm not here. Dad, please!"

A man's voice spoke in my ear. "Sorry, son, but Grace has just stepped out. I'll tell her you called." Click.

"She's out," I lied. "Anyway, you know, I remembered something. I think that girl is getting married. Seems to me Dawn said something about it." I couldn't go on. Tim knew I was lying. Maybe that's why he wouldn't give up.

"Aw, well, that's that," he said. "But listen. How about Dawn getting me a blind date? She must know lots of girls. Come on, Jeff, set it up."

Once, Tim and I had been able to talk to each other. But how can you tell your oldest friend that no girl in her right mind would touch him with a ten-foot pole? "I'll ask her," I said weakly.

Of course, Dawn looked at me as if I was crazy. "A blind date?" she said. "Who with? Jeff, everybody knows about him. And even if

I knew somebody who didn't, you think I'd do that to a friend?"

"Look, he just wants to talk to a girl," I said. "He'll wear gloves and makeup." I stopped. What I was saying sounded wild. How could Dawn tell a bright, pretty young woman that she was going out with a . . . a freak? For that's what Tim was now. A freak.

"Dawn," I said, "we could go to the movies. We could meet there. It would be dark. Then, afterward, we could go to some real dim place. . . ." Dawn's face stopped me.

"Jeff," she said, "give up. If I did get somebody to go out with him, I'd tell her the truth. She'd be doing it out of . . . out of pity."

Pity. For Tim Malpas, the tall, handsome basketball star. It cut me up. I thought of Maddy Alder. I felt like going over to her house and taking her out and rubbing her face in mud, pouring wet mud on all her gorgeous clothes, rubbing it in her shiny hair. . . . Dawn seemed to read my mind.

"Maddy Alder has left town," she said. "Her family moved away last week. The house is empty. Nobody seems to know where they went."

"To hell!" I yelled. "I hope they're all in hell!" I broke off, shocked at myself.

"I can't listen to that, Jeff," Dawn said very quietly. And she turned her back on me and walked away.

She called me a little later. She had thought it over, and there was someone who might be willing to date Tim. Her name was Amy, a friend of Dawn's who was going to nursing school in the fall. I didn't really think Tim would like the idea of being a nurse's first case. But 1 said OK.

Dawn had explained everything to Amy. Everything, that is, except the part about Maddy. Amy was even anxious to meet Tim. No dark movie, she insisted. Something out in the air and sun, to get the poor guy out of his stuffy room.

We all piled into Amy's car and drove out to Silver Lake. There's a little beach there, and it's usually not crowded. We were lucky. The day we went it was almost deserted. Anyway, Tim didn't look too bad. He'd learned by now to put the makeup on so you could hardly tell. Of course, it was getting a little thick, because it wouldn't wash off. The gloves were hot, and

he wasn't very comfortable. But he was on a date, and that was all that mattered.

Amy was small and cute and talked a lot. After she got out of nursing school, she said she planned to work with psychiatric cases. I caught on. She thought Tim was crazy, just as Dr. Solloway had. That's why she'd been interested.

After we changed and settled down on the beach, Tim took a dip in the lake. Amy watched carefully when he came out. The red drop was still on his back. The makeup hadn't come off in the water. He'd taken off his gloves to swim, and his hands were slimy with mud, but not from the lake bottom. He took a new pair of gloves out of the picnic hamper and pulled them on. "Ever hold hands with a rubber duck?" he said, and reached for one of Amy's hands.

She shrunk back. For all her interest in his case, Amy wasn't able to touch Tim. She started to talk, fast, to cover up.

"Let's talk about you, up front," she said. "You need to talk about it. You picked up some mud. Why?" Tim didn't answer. "I'll bet you threw it at somebody, didn't you? You hurt the

person." I knew Dawn hadn't told her anything. Amy was just a good guesser.

"No," Tim said. He didn't like this. But Amy went on.

"You hit the person. And you feel guilty. So you're making this happen to yourself. The mind is strong, you know. Some people can stop blood from flowing just by looking at it. Some people make sores come out on their hands and feet by just thinking about them. You're keeping yourself from getting clean because you think you deserve to be dirty."

"No!" Tim and I spoke together. But Dawn looked as if Amy had turned on a light in the dark.

"That's right," Dawn said. "That's right. Suppose you really knew that somebody had a right to do something, even if you didn't like it. You knew you couldn't really blame that person, but you were mad anyway. So—you threw something at them. You knew you were wrong. So then you hurt yourself. Maybe if you just admitted you were wrong. Maybe you'd be OK then."

Tim looked at her in horror. I couldn't believe what I'd heard. Then, someone

laughed. A low, deep laugh. It wasn't Amy. It wasn't Tim. It wasn't Dawn. And it wasn't me.

Amy looked around to see who it was. The three of us didn't look. We'd heard that laugh before. In the Roma Cafe, when Maddy Alder had made the man stumble.

"Who laughed?" Amy said. We stared at her. She thought she was the only one who had heard it. "Which one of you laughed?" she asked again.

We didn't answer. We didn't explain. We just started to pack up our towels and swimming gear. It was another ride home when nobody talked. And Tim never spoke to me about dating again.

After that, Tim spent a week in the hospital. He had every kind of test known. There wasn't anything the matter with his skin. Dr. Solloway got two famous doctors down from Boston to examine him. They told Tim not to use makeup any more, because it was filling up his pores. They had nothing else to suggest.

Except to go to a psychiatrist. Tim went. He told the doctor that he'd picked up some mud to throw at somebody, and ever since then, nothing would wash off his skin. Out came the

word *hysterical* again: Tim was doing it to himself.

We knew better. We knew that somewhere Maddy Alder was laughing that deep, cold laugh. But you can't tell a doctor that somebody has put a curse on you. Or, if you can, you know you'd better not. You're likely to wind up behind bars in a mental hospital.

"It's bad being like this," Tim said, "but at least I'm free."

Free. To do what? To sit in a room and smear dirt on everything you touch? To go out only at night, or to a place where you're sure there won't be other people to laugh at you? To have only one friend left?

I was that friend. And I began to ask myself if *I* was free.

5 A Star Is Born

From the last day of school, Dawn had begun to change. My mother said girls her age often get prettier. Dawn was prettier, but I didn't like it. Her softness, sweetness seemed to be gone. After that day at the beach, when she tried to blame Tim for what Maddy had done to him, I didn't call her much. But one day that summer, she called me.

"Jeff, I got something in the mail today," she said. "You know, I always thought I'd like to be a singer."

"Yeah." Dawn had sung in the school choir, but she hadn't been good enough to do solos.

"So, what came in the mail?" I asked.

"An invitation to be in a talent contest next Saturday," she said. "First prize is a full scholarship for a year to a music college in New York. And an awful lot of money for expenses."

"They must have got hold of the wrong name," I said. "But, if you feel like it, why not give it a shot? If you don't think you'll be embarrassed."

"No, I won't if you'll go with me," Dawn said.

I'm not sure why I agreed to go with her. Maybe I was hoping things between us would be like they were before. That's a laugh. After that night, I couldn't bear to even be near her.

I borrowed Tim's car for the trip into New York City. When I drove up to her house, Dawn was waiting for me, dressed in a new red suit. The locket I'd given her, so long ago, was at her throat. She was excited and full of stage fright. It made her seem more like the Dawn I'd known before all this started. She'd learned a new song, and she sang it to me as we rode along. I felt bad, for she really didn't sing very well. The contest was going to end in a big disappointment. Maybe I should have talked

her out of trying. But it was too late now.

The contest was in the ballroom of a famous hotel. The judges were pretty big names in both pop and classical music. They sat at a table at the end of the long room. I spotted Rose Drew as soon as we went in, and my heart sank. She was the best singer in our school.

The music teachers all thought she had a fine career in music ahead of her. She'd sung many solos while Dawn was in the second row of the chorus.

We all sat down in folding chairs that faced a little platform. One by one, a man called the names of the contestants. Rose sang up a storm, and the audience clapped, even cheered. All the singers were better than Dawn. She knew it, too. Her hands were clasped so tight together in her lap that the knuckles went white.

I thought I'd be doing her a favor if I leaned over and said, "Let's get out of here." Instead, when her name was called, I whispered, "You're going to win." Lying to Tim had loosened my tongue so much it seemed to lie by itself. Dawn walked up the

aisle and stepped onto the platform. Someone came over and lowered the microphone. Dawn had never used a mike before, as far as I knew.

"She'll stand too close," I thought. The man at the piano lifted his hand. He began playing the song Dawn had sung to me in the car. Her red suit picked up the light.

The microphone exploded. Flames flashed around Dawn, as if she were being burned at a metal stake.

"Dawn!" I wanted to scream. But I was almost in a state of shock. And nobody would have heard me anyway. For the audience was hypnotized, as a voice that was part Liza Minelli, part Diana Ross, belted through the room. It was chili pepper and steaming dry ice together. To me, Dawn was burning. But only I saw the flames. What the audience saw was a woman who belted out a song so hot and cold and sweet that it set fire to their blood.

When it ended, there wasn't any question who would win. The judges rushed to Dawn and threw their arms around her. Rose Drew was sitting across from me. Tears were running down her face. But I could see that she agreed with the crowd. There was a look of shock on

her face. “Dawn?” she was saying to herself. “Little Dawn? Dawn?”

By the time we got into the car to go home, Dawn was so excited she couldn't keep still. She bounced up and down on the seat as we drove, crying, giggling, crying again. She was full of a future more wonderful than she’d ever dreamed it could be. I wanted to be as happy as she was. But I remembered what Dawn had told me about Maddy on the day we left school. And I remembered the day at the beach when Dawn had turned against Tim.

Dawn had always been able to read my thoughts now and then. As the picture of the beach flashed through my mind, her face clouded. “Jeff,” she said, “you think there’s something bad about this, don’t you?”

I swallowed hard. “What do *you* think?” was all I could get out.

Her eyes grew hard. But they were questioning. She really didn’t know. Or, if she did, she had pushed it down so far that there was no bringing it back. “You’re jealous,” she said. “I’m going to be somebody, and you’re jealous.”

I wasn’t jealous. I was afraid. Nothing

Maddy Alder had made to happen could be good. And Maddy had put that fire and ice in Dawn's sweet little voice. It looked as if she'd done Dawn a favor. But it wouldn't end that way. I knew that, even then.

There was nothing I could have said to Dawn, though. How could I throw cold water on what she thought was the best thing that could ever happen to her?

"Dawn, I'm not jealous," I said. She didn't answer. After a minute, she began to hum to herself and smile—a secret smile full of happiness. Maddy Alder had done another rotten thing. She'd ended my relationship with Dawn. After the contest, we never dated again.

By now, you've probably guessed who Dawn is. "Wisdom can make you happy," Maddy Alder had said that last day of school. I don't know whether Dawn was happy or not. She'd been through three husbands, and there were a lot of strange stories going around. The day I started climbing to the cave to find Tim was the day after the night she won those five Grammy Awards. That night ended in disaster. But I'm getting ahead of myself. . . .

6 Making New Plans

That summer I scraped together enough money to buy a car of my own. It wasn't the greatest car in the world, but it set me free. There was no more need to borrow Tim's; no more driving around the corner to wash the dirty steering wheel. But I knew that what I liked most about it was that it broke another link with Tim. He was beginning to be a burden on my back.

One night Sally Bart and I went to a drive-in movie. Afterward, we stopped off at Aldo's Pizza Castle. Marv Sikes and Donna Burke were there, too, and we all sat together. Usually, when I was with my other friends, I didn't mention Tim. But that night I wanted to

hear them say something. I wanted them to tell me that I had to do what I wanted to do, and felt guilty about.

Donna gave me my opening. “Are you still going to State Tech to take computer science?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “But, I was supposed to rent a room in town and share it with Tim Malpas.”

“Tim Malpas! Aw, come on, that’s gross,” Marv said. “You can’t live with that weirdo. Nobody can. Hey, think what it would be like. You bring home one of your new friends and say, ‘Here’s my roommate—but don’t shake hands with him! He’s nuts and he doesn’t believe in taking showers!’ ”

Everybody snickered. I did, too, and was ashamed of myself. Marv had said what everybody thought: Tim was nuts, and wouldn’t wash himself. The skin trouble excuse was dead. Nobody believed it anymore. We live in a time when you go to a doctor if you have a skin problem and the doctor cures you. Marv had said what I wanted to hear. I had to hear some more, though.

“Tim still thinks we’re going to State Tech

and room together," I said. "He keeps talking about it. I haven't got the heart to tell him it's out."

"Jeff," Sally said, "you have to tell him. He can't go to State Tech. As soon as they saw him, and found out how crazy he is, they'd make him leave. You don't owe Tim anything. He's an old friend, but he's cracked up. Maybe you should talk to his mother. Maybe she could get it across to him that he can't go to college. How could he work on a computer? It would be covered with. . . ." She wrinkled up her nose.

They were all wrong, of course. Tim was beginning to get a little flaky from being trapped in his filthy body. But the dirt had done it to him. Maddy Alder had done it to him. Yet, how could I tell my friends that Tim was under a curse? When I tried to defend him or make excuses, it only made things worse. "But Tim does wash. The dirt won't come off," I said.

"Jeff," Donna said, "you know that's not true. Tim doesn't wash. If he washed, he'd be clean. He's crazy, and he says he washes, but he doesn't. Look, this is the dumbest subject

I've ever talked about. Some guy who won't wash and says he does. Let's forget Tim Malpas. Tell him to get lost, Jeff, and get on with your life."

She took a big bite of pepperoni pizza. Sally still looked concerned. But Marv started to talk about the new tapes he'd bought, and that was the end Of Tim Malpas for the evening. I felt a ton lighter, though. They'd said what I had told myself, said it out loud. I couldn't room with Tim Malpas. He couldn't go to college. And I had to tell him to stop planning on it.

I didn't sleep much that night. I lay awake thinking up ways to tell Tim. At breakfast, my father saved me.

"Jeff," he said, "you know I've always wanted to own my own hardware store. Working for Metal King is OK, but I want to be my own boss. I heard about a store I could buy last week and . . . I bought it."

"That's terrific, Dad!" I said. "Congratulations!"

He smiled like a kid on Christmas morning. "There's only one thing," he said. "It's not here in town. It's in Clifton, 300 miles upstate. I

know you've been looking forward to going to State Tech, and you still can if you want to. But there's a good technical college in Clifton, too. I've asked around, and I'm pretty sure you can transfer if you want to. It's up to you, but. . . ." There was more understanding in his eyes than I'd ever seen before. "I thought maybe you'd welcome the chance to get away."

The weight dropped off my back. I could breathe for the first time, really, since the night of the senior prom. And for the first time since I was a little kid, I jumped and threw my arms around my father and hugged him.

Cara Malpas, Tim's sister, was a year younger than Tim and me. She had always been sharp and good-natured and popular. If there was trouble, Cara just didn't stick around. She waved good-bye and turned up again when it was all over. Her talent was sewing. She could stitch up anything in an hour if she just saw a picture of it.

When I went over to Tim's that morning to break the news, Cara was standing on the front steps. Three suitcases were on the ground at

the foot of the steps. A big canvas bag was slung over one of Cara's shoulders. And there was a big box under the other arm.

"I'm leaving," she said. "It's too much. Nobody wants to come here anymore. He's my brother, and I guess I loved him once. Maybe I still do, but I don't want this kind of life."

"What about your mother?" I asked.

Cara laughed. "She doesn't know I'm still alive," she said. "All she's thought of for months is her precious Timmy boy. Look, Jeff, he's. . . ." She pretended to be sick. "I'm not mean. If he'd been burned, or hurt in an accident or something, I'd help him any way I could. But—dirt!" She stopped talking and her face grew very serious.

"Jeff," she said, "he isn't really dirty. I mean, he doesn't want to be. He spends hours in that shower. And I don't know, I just don't believe he's punishing himself for something the way the doctors say. Tim was never like that. It wouldn't come on him overnight. Jeff, what happened?"

It was as close as I ever came to telling the truth about Tim. Cara was Tim's sister. Maybe

if I told her she'd stay. I began. "Do you remember Maddy Alder?" I asked her.

Suddenly, I was lying on the ground. I'd been standing straight, both feet firmly on the pavement in front of the Malpas house. There had been no sound, or flash of light, or wind, or stone thrown at me. I was just knocked down. My nose hurt as if it was broken. I couldn't breathe. My sunglasses were lying beside me, smashed. Cara's eyes were huge.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. My nose felt double its usual size. I pushed myself to my knees and managed to stand up. Cara backed away from me.

"Don't touch me," she said. "Please don't. And don't tell me anything. I don't know what happened." She raised her voice and almost shouted. "I don't know what happened! I don't know anything about it, and I don't want to. And I'll never try to find out!"

A long gray limo pulled up to the curb. "Hey, Cara, you ready?" a guy called, as he climbed out of the car. He was a tough-looking man, older than Cara and me. I'd heard she'd been

going out with somebody her mother didn't like. But right now I didn't care what she did.

"Help me with these bags," Cara said. The guy came up the walk and picked up the cases. Cara followed him out to the car. But first she dropped the big box on the steps and pointed to it. "Something I made for Tim," she said. "He'll need them. Tell my mother I'll write." And she was gone.

My nose hurt terribly. I picked up the box and walked home. My mother drove me to the emergency room at City Hospital. Without thinking, I took the box with me. While we were waiting, I opened it. Inside were two—I don't know what you'd call them. They were like rain ponchos, with hoods that would cover a person's head and body to the knees. One was dark blue, one was dark green. They were in a kind of thick cotton material. I got the idea. They would be cool, not like plastic or wool. And they would hide a filthy face, hide—like our graduation robes—unwashable hands. Maybe Cara had helped Tim as much as anybody could.

My nose wasn't broken, but it was swollen

for a week. I had a black eye and cuts on my hands and face. A story got around that I'd had a fight with Cara's boyfriend. Tim thought that was funny when I told him. I waited until he stopped laughing before I told him what really happened. We didn't have to mention Maddy. We knew.

Tim wasn't a saint or a hero, any more than Dawn or Cara. But this time he sat still for a minute and then said, "Nobody is supposed to take my part. Maybe you'd better stop coming around here."

He wanted me to say, "Hey, buddy, you can't get rid of me that easy." Instead, I said, "Tim, I won't be coming around much longer. We're moving to Clifton, and I'm going to Clifton Tech instead of State."

He was quiet again for what seemed a long time. Then, he admitted the truth to himself for the first time. "I'm not going to State, either," he said. "How could I?"

Later that night, long after I had left him, Tim went out. I don't know whether he drove or walked. The guard who told the story didn't know that. The guard's name was Mac

Robinson, and he worked at the zoo.

Our town has a good, small zoo. Its animals live on islands, separated from people by big deep ditches that can't be jumped. Mac didn't see Tim until he was almost at the ditch around the lions. He wasn't sure how Tim got there. Tim was wearing one of Cara's dark ponchos, and he blended into the night.

When he did see Tim, Robinson circled around the ditch to try to sneak up behind him. Robinson said he thought Tim might be a nut with a gun, and he didn't want Tim to shoot at the lions. He pulled out his own pistol and covered Tim in case he made a move. But Tim just stood there, faceless and armless in the long dark hooded cape. On the island, the lions stirred. They were lying almost in a heap, the way lions sleep sometimes. Then, they pushed away from each other.

"They spread out, all staring at the guy," Robinson told a reporter later. He went on to tell how their eyes shone—there was enough light from the tall path lamps to make cats' eyes glow. There was enough, too, for Robinson to see the flowing lion shapes

moving around their island. Then, all the lions turned toward Tim and roared.

Robinson had been around animals a long time. He knew the deep roars meant warning and fear. Other animals heard them. Wild cries from the monkey house cut through the silence. Birds screeched, and elephants screamed. Lights went on in the keeper's house. Robinson knew he had to take action.

"Hey, you there," he called to Tim. Tim turned. The hood covered most of his face, but he must have seen Robinson's gun. It didn't seem to frighten him. Maybe he hoped Robinson would use it. Maybe he even hoped that, somehow, the lions would get at him. I don't know what he thought. He just turned his back on Robinson and the lions and the keeper who was running his way. Tim walked out the zoo gates into the park, and disappeared.

Nobody followed him. He hadn't done anything. He hadn't even bothered the animals. Not in any way that could be explained.

In the morning, Mac Robinson got off duty. He went to the zoo parking lot, got his car, and drove out through the gates. He was tired. He

didn't need any problems. But under a tree in the park, he saw a man lying with his face in the grass.

The man was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. His hair was light. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Robinson was an ex-cop, though. He knew that sleepers were sometimes very ill or even dead. He sighed and stopped his car. He got out and went over and shook the sleeping man.

Tim sat up. He raised his hands and rubbed his eyes, then dropped them. Robinson didn't know he was the same man from the night before. Tim had taken off the poncho. His hands were muddy, of course. But Robinson thought it was from the dirt under the tree and the morning dew. He looked at Tim's face and laughed.

"Buddy, you're going to have some job getting that off your face," he said. "You've got grass stains all over you. Better take a back way home. Those green streaks make you look like something from another planet."

Tim screamed.

"It was the most awful noise I've ever

heard," the guard reported. "Worse than all the animals put together. I tell a big grown-up guy that he's got grass stains on his face, and he screams? I thought he was crazy. I pulled my gun. But he didn't go for me. He ran across the park, screaming his head off." The guard didn't know that the grass stains would be on Tim's face forever.

7 A Dinner to Remember

At home, we were packing to move. All the rooms were littered with plastic bags and boxes and big barrels. Just to add to the mess, the outside of the house was being painted. We'd put a FOR SALE sign on the lawn, and some people in a passing car saw it. The house was just what they'd been hunting for, they said. They offered a fair price for it. But they didn't like our white paint. They wanted it yellow, and they wanted us to paint it before they moved in. So, up went ladders and scaffolds. In the middle of packing, Mom kept making coffee for painters in white overalls and caps. They didn't ask her to, but she insisted.

Because she was that kind of mom, she stopped me one day when I was on my way out

to my Saturday job. “Jeff, before we move,” she said, “I want you to invite Tim over to dinner.”

I said, “1 don't think he'd come.”

“You mean you don't want him to come,” she said. I blushed with guilt. “He was always your best friend. And I miss him, if you don’t. He won’t come downstairs when I go over to see his mother. Jeff, he probably is a little crazy, but he’s not dangerous. I’d just like to try to have one evening when things are the way they used to be, for us all.”

I turned around and went to the phone and invited Tim for dinner on Sunday at one o’clock.

The next afternoon, he drove up and parked his car in our driveway. We couldn't see much of him, for he was wearing the dark green poncho. I opened the door before he rang the bell. Tim walked in slowly and said almost in a whisper, “Hello.”

“Take off your cape,” my mother said.

“Maybe I’d better not,” Tim said. My mother went up to him and pulled at the poncho.

“Tim, we’re your second family,” she said. “Take that thing off and make yourself at

home."

But even my mother had to struggle to keep her face smooth and kind when she saw Tim. He had begun to let his hair grow long. He had tried to grow a beard, too. He had shaved the beard off after the grass stains greened it. Oddly enough, that worked. The part of his face that had been covered by the beard was clean. He'd nicked himself with the razor, though, and a smear of blood told where.

The green from the grass made ribbons in the layers of old makeup. And I knew that the jam was still on his back under the long-sleeved shirt he had on. The cuffs were buttoned tight around rubber gloves.

My mother and father were heroes. My father marched up to Tim and shook his rubbery hand. My mother stood on tiptoe and kissed him, just as she always had when he came over. She didn't even wipe her lips afterward. "Sit down, boys," she said. "Dinner will be ready in just a little while."

My father, Tim, and I went into the living room and sat down. Talking was tough. My father had always asked Tim about his sports when we were growing up. He'd tried to get

Tim to work on me to be more athletic. Now, Tim didn't dare go near a tennis court or swimming pool. I think he shot baskets by himself on the park court if he could ever find it deserted. Not much to talk about.

So, my father talked about the army when he was young, and the mayor, and the weather, and his boss at his old job at Metal King, . . . and then he made a mistake. He started talking about his new store. Tim's eyes flashed. "Hey, Mr. Ring," he said, "you're going to need help there. I know a lot about nails, and nuts and bolts and stuff like that. How about giving me a job? I wouldn't mind moving to Clifton."

My father swallowed hard. I still don't know whether Tim was serious, or whether he just wanted to see what my father would say. For a few seconds, Dad didn't speak. Then, he knew he had to answer. "Tim, buying the store really cleaned me out. For a while, I'm just going to have to run it by myself as best I can. There's one old guy who's been there for nearly 40 years, and I'll keep him on. But I won't be hiring anybody else for a long time."

Tim nodded. I had expected him to say something nasty. But just then my mother

came to the door and said, “Dinner’s ready.”

My mother had studied the problem, and she solved it with a dry dinner. Nothing we had to eat could drip, stain, or leave grease. We had cold roast chicken and little roast beef sandwiches. Carrot sticks, sliced green peppers, and colored straws for the iced tea were at every place. My father started to lift his glass to his lips, and my mother stopped him with a sharp look. He set it down and unwrapped his straw.

It was hard to eat, looking at Tim. I tried to keep my eyes on my plate, and my father spent a lot of time looking at his chicken, too. My mother, though, as I’ve said, was a hero. She looked right into Tim’s eyes. She didn’t eat very much, though. And it was my mother who brought the next horror on Tim.

“Come out into the backyard and look at my zinnias and marigolds,” she said. “And my beautiful roses. Come on, Timmy.” She took his rubber-gloved hand, and he followed her to the back door.

It was Sunday, and we thought nobody was around. But one of the painters had left early the day before. He had come back to finish painting the wall he had begun on Saturday. He

was on a high ladder, and his can of paint was on the drop panel, just outside the kitchen door. And . . . he hadn't judged the space between the ladder and the door correctly.

My mother unlatched the screen door and pushed it open. She stood aside to let Tim go first. The door hit the side of the ladder. The ladder didn't fall, but it swayed. And as Tim stepped out, the can of yellow paint fell from the ladder onto his head.

"Hey, fella, I'm sorry," the painter yelled. "You should have watched where you were going!"

My mother leaped to try to wipe off as much of the paint as she could with her hands. She thought she could keep it from going through to his skin more than it had. It was useless, though. Tim's hair, face, and body were already soaked with yellow paint. He howled. The noise brought my father and me running from the living room. We stopped short, seeing Tim in his agony. I cried, helpless to ease my friend's pain . . . or mine.

Tim stood there howling, waving his arms, afraid even to try to wipe paint out of his eyes. His eyelashes were stiff with yellow paint, and

it was growing sticky over the grass stripes and the cracked old makeup that would never be washed away. My mother had run into the house and grabbed a kitchen towel. She was trying to wipe some of the paint off Tim. It didn't help at all.

Tim stumbled toward home, howling. I tried to get him to let me drive him, but he only howled, like a wild, sick animal. I wanted to walk beside him, but he strode ahead of me. People on the street stared. A woman with two little kids pulled them toward her, shouting, "Don't look! Don't look!"

Tim lurched up the walk to his house. At the door, he stopped and, as near as I could tell through the awful yellow coat of paint, glared at me.

"Don't you, or any of your stinking family, ever come near me again!" he snarled. He slammed the door so hard the glass in it rattled. I stood alone on the grass, with his pain etched in my face by streaming tears.

My mother tried. She called Mrs. Malpas again and again. "Please, we'll do anything, anything we can," she pleaded.

But Mrs. Malpas screamed at her. "How

could you let this happen? How could you?"

My father even thought of offering Tim the job he'd asked for. But there my mother drew the line.

"You've worked all your life for this," she said. "He could ruin your store. I love Tim, and I feel so sorry for him. . . ." She choked up. "But if he's—whatever he is—you can't let it spoil everything you've worked for."

To say the word *lucky* in the same breath with Tim Malpas's name sounds like a sick joke. But Tim *was* lucky, in a way. None of the yellow paint really got into his eyes. My mother managed to make Mrs. Malpas tell her that. His vision wasn't affected. That is, he could still see. But his vision of the world was now so twisted and ugly that it was almost worse than blindness. For him, the world was a nightmare place. I guess you do see the world pretty much the way it sees you.

In the middle of our preparing to move, my mother went into town and bought yards and yards of dark cloth. Some was dark red, some navy blue, some forest green, some oxford gray. Her sewing machine had been packed, but she got it out again. She cut out a dozen

ponchos with hoods, like the ones Cara had made Tim, and stitched them up. She worked for hours, day after day. But I knew she felt it was something, at least, that she could do. When they were finished, she packed them in a big box, and wrapped them in plain brown paper. She addressed the box to Mr. Tim Malpas.

"Jeff, take this to the post office," she said. "In your car. I don't want anyone to see you carrying it down the street. Maybe Tim and his mother will think Cara sent it." There's an old custom I've heard about. After a funeral, the casket is lifted into the hearse. All the people at the funeral get into their cars and turn on the lights. Then with the hearse leading the way, everyone rides slowly down the street past the house the dead person lived in, before going on to the cemetery.

It was like that the day we left for Clifton. The big red moving van with all our things in it led the way. My father and mother followed in their blue Chevy, and I followed them in my clunker. We drove down the street past the Malpas house. The body was in the house this time, not in the leading car. But it was a funeral

just the same.

By the time we got out on the highway in the sunlight, I felt a little better. We were heading toward Iron Hill, where Tim and I had found the cave. It seemed a thousand years ago. “I should have gone up there one more time,” I thought, as the hill loomed up ahead. And suddenly, I couldn’t go any further.

There was nothing wrong with my car. The motor was fine. It seemed as if an invisible barrier was stretched across the road. The red van and my parents’ blue Chevrolet were driving cheerfully on. But I couldn't move another foot. Sweat broke out on my forehead. Yet, I felt cold. Instead of summer sunlight on the road, I saw ice and snow. I heard howling, like Tim’s on the day the paint fell. Not one voice, but many. The noise seemed to echo off stone walls. This time, I decided I had nothing to lose.

“Maddy,” I said, “please. I didn’t throw any mud at you. I’ve never told anybody what I know. I’m leaving, and I’ll probably never see Tim Malpas again. Please, let me go.”

I waited. It happened. She laughed. That low, cold, knowing laugh filled the car. Then, the

snow on the road was gone. Sun streamed through the car windows. The car leaped ahead and so did my heart. I went sailing down the road after the van and the blue Chevy with summer alive again all around me.

8 Clifton

Clifton was a sunny town. Everything seemed newer, brighter than it had back home. Our house was on a pleasant tree-lined street. My mother couldn't wait to plant another garden in the long green yard. My dad's store had been there for years and was well-thought-of. Everybody had liked the elderly owner who sold it, and they liked Dad, too. Business was good from the first day. At first, I missed my friends. But I knew a lot of them were going away to school, or leaving Cornich to get jobs anyway. It was the right time to start a new life.

In September, I started my freshman year at Clifton Tech. It was a good school, with a lot of activities. I joined the Drama Club and the

Chess Club, and soon had a bunch of new friends. None of them had ever heard of Tim Malpas or Maddy Alder, and they weren't going to hear anything from me.

The next four years were full of fun, and anger, and love, and trouble, the way years are set up to be. I fell in and out of love, passed most of my exams with A's, flunked a few, grew a mustache and shaved it off, listened to a lot of music, and read a lot of books. Some of the books were for psychology courses. I learned all about hysterical diseases, and rewrote in my mind what had happened that last summer in my hometown. I didn't really forget, but if anybody had asked me, I'd have said I once knew a guy who turned into a flake. Tough, but it happens. What can you do?

The night I put on my cap and gown to graduate from Tech, some old memories came back. I told myself, "Hey, leave the past in the past." There hadn't been any weird laughs, or unexplained knockdowns, or invisible road blocks for four years. I almost convinced myself I'd imagined it all.

I'd done pretty well in school. I was offered a good job in computers for a big company in Clifton. After a year, I was transferred to New York City. I rented an apartment in a nice high-rise building, bought some furniture, and started yet another life. I was as happy as most people ever get. And I was going to get happier.

One day, in the elevator of my building, I met a young woman in a trim, dark uniform. Her name was Rhonda. She was a flight attendant for an airline that flew all over the world. From then on, whenever she was in town, it was dinner in her apartment one night, mine the next.

Of course, we didn't always cook. We had favorite restaurants. One night, after a good French dinner, we decided to take a walk down to the river. On one of the streets, we saw a storefront with a red curtain drawn across the lower half. There were cards in front of the curtain, odd-looking cards with pictures of kings and queens and people dressed in stars printed on them. The sign said: MADAME PALMA, PSYCHIC READER.

"Let's have our fortunes told," Rhonda said.

"I don't believe in that stuff," I said. My voice was rough. Nobody says as strongly that he doesn't believe as somebody who does. I'd almost forgotten that I had to believe. So I said I didn't.

"Of course you don't—I don't either," Rhonda said. "But it would be fun. Come on, please?"

"All right, why not?" I said.

We rang the bell and waited. There was a second curtain at the back of the shop. A tiny hand pushed one edge of it aside. Over the window curtain, we saw a little girl in a long blue jumper and a green blouse come out. She must have been about five. Something about her disturbed me. I'd never seen her before, I was sure. But the way she looked at me made me shiver.

"Rhonda, let's get out of here," I said. "It's nuts. I don't believe in it."

"You promised," Rhonda said. "It won't hurt you, even if it is a fake."

The curtain at the back was pushed aside again. This time, a woman stepped out. She had on a long blue dress, of the same material as the child's. There was a blue veil across her

face, like the kind Arab women wear. All you could see were her eyes. A dog barked. I saw that a big Doberman was lying in a corner of the shop.

The woman opened the door. “You want a reading?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rhonda said.

“Palm, cards, or crystal ball?” the woman asked.

Rhonda shrugged. “I don't know. Cards, I guess.”

The woman waved us inside. I sat down on a chair a few feet from the Doberman. The dog lay quietly on the floor, but his eyes were fixed on me. The little girl sat down beside the dog and stroked his head. Rhonda sat across from the woman at a little table. The woman took a pack of cards, and had Rhonda shuffle them and cut them into piles. She began to turn cards up and tell Rhonda what they meant.

It was pretty good. She said Rhonda would travel, which got a giggle. Travel was Rhonda’s job. She said there was a dark man in her life—well, there I sat. Rhonda would make a good mother, the fortune-teller said. Not hard to guess, since she liked kids. There was one

thing about a sickness in Rhonda's past that I hadn't known about. It was true, Rhonda told me later. But most people have been sick at one time or another.

After she finished and put the cards back in the pack, the woman motioned to me. "The cards have something to say to you," she said.

"No, not me, I don't go in for fortune-telling," I said.

The woman shuffled the cards and pulled one out of the deck. She put it on the table. It was a picture of a man hanging upside down. "You have a friend who can't leave his house," she said. "He is hung on a curse. A terrible curse. You know about this. Once you even made it worse than it was. You didn't mean to. It wasn't just you. It was your family."

I couldn't move. I felt sweat trickling down my back. The woman drew another card. It showed an angel and people coming up out of their graves.

"This curse will hang over you forever," she said. "You want to think you are free of it because you have tried to forget it. But you know that it is there, at the center of your life. If you don't do something to help this poor

man, you will pay a terrible price."

"Jeff, what's the matter?" Rhonda said. She came over to me and took my hand. "Did she say something true? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"No, no, it's just so silly it makes me mad," I said. But my voice was choked. The eyes above the blue veil looked into mine. Then, a low laugh came through the blue cloth. The woman put up her hand and pulled the veil away.

It was Cara Malpas.

I was limp. For a moment, I had thought I might see the face of Maddy Alder.

"Sorry, Jeff," Cara said. "I tell people so much garbage. They try to fit it into their lives. Here was a chance to tell somebody something that would make him squirm. But I couldn't let you think. . . ."

"Whew," I said. "You had me scared stiff. Rhonda, this is Cara Malpas."

"Cara Sears," Cara said. "The little girl's my daughter, Tina. Looks like her uncle, doesn't she?"

"How long has it been since we've seen each other, Cara?" I asked. "It must be five years

since that day you left. What are you doing down here working in this—this racket?" I couldn't think of another word for it.

"1 married the guy you saw me with that last day. We moved here, and then we broke up. I couldn't find a job. One night I went to a party and somebody gave me a deck of tarot cards. I found out I was good at reading. If I didn't really see anything, I made something up. People loved it. I got a chance to set up here. So—it's a living. . . . When I saw you through the curtain I almost had a heart attack."

"Cara's an old friend from my hometown," I told Rhonda. Then, both Cara and I were silent. The question hung between us like the man on the card.

"Tim . . . do you see him?" I finally asked.

Cara shook her head. "I've only been home once, when Mom died," she said.

"Your mother's dead? I'm sorry, Cara," I said.

"Yeah, about a year ago. She'd always had a weak heart. I guess she got so she just couldn't take it."

Rhonda didn't understand, but she was too polite to ask. I felt I had to explain. But I

wanted Cara to know the real story shouldn't be told. "Cara's brother had a bad accident," I lied. "He can't go out. It was hard on Mrs. Malpas."

"He does go out," Cara said. "He wears those ponchos, like the ones I made him. Somebody sent him several more of them. He used to go out in his car wearing one, and it wasn't so bad. Now. . . ."

"You mean something else happened to him?" I waited for the worst.

"Not really. But somebody stole his car. He left the keys in it in the driveway one night. That was six months ago. I don't go there, but he calls me sometimes. My mother didn't leave him very much. He can't afford to buy a new car. And even if he did, Jeff, how would he go and buy it? His license is out of date. How can he have a picture taken?" Cara's eyes filled with tears.

Rhonda looked very curious about all this. She opened her mouth to ask a question. I gave her the sharpest look I've ever given anyone in my life. She didn't like it, but she kept quiet. "Cara," I said, "if there was anything I could do, I'd do it. But you understand. You don't go

there, either. You left."

I paid for the two card readings, giving her a lot more than she asked. We promised to get together for a drink, or coffee, sometime. We knew we never would. Each of us had opened up old wounds in the other. They had to heal.

Rhonda couldn't wait until we were out on the street. "What was that all about?" she asked.

"Forget it, Ron," I said. "I mean really forget it. You don't want to know."

"I *do* want to know," she said.

"OK then, I *can't* tell you. Not now, not ever." I took her arm and began to walk very fast. "That's the end of it," I said. "Please don't ever ask me about it again."

For weeks, she tried to get it out of me. I didn't blame her, but I didn't tell. "It's over and done with," I'd say. "It's dead."

It wasn't, though. I began to dream. I dreamed of the low laugh. I dreamed of a voice full of stones. I dreamed of mud flying at a green dress. I dreamed of lying flat on pavement, hurt and amazed. And most of all, I dreamed of a monster in a dark cape and hood, who tore the hood away from his face and

showed me a face I'd once known.

Every time, somewhere in the dream, I heard the words, "If you don't do something to help this poor man, you will pay a terrible price." Cara had said she didn't really mean it. She'd only wanted to scare me. But I kept hearing the words, ". . . help . . . a terrible price."

9 Homecoming

Rhonda came over to my apartment the night the Grammy Awards were given out. Most people expected Dawn to win several awards in the female vocalist category. I had told Rhonda that I'd gone around with Dawn once. She was proud of me for being the ex-boyfriend of someone that famous.

Dawn wore a red sequin gown to the Awards. It was a way-out dress, the kind she wore better than anybody else in show business. I don't have to tell you, though. You know what happened. She stepped up to the microphone to say her thank-you. Just as she had stepped up to a microphone years ago in a cheap red suit with a locket around her neck.

I yelled, “Dawn, no!”

Rhonda jumped and turned to look at me. “What’s wrong?” she cried. She looked back at the TV and then she yelled, too. For this time, it really happened.

They’re still trying to find out why. A bomb? A short circuit? Whatever it was, the microphone exploded. Dawn was in flames, burning at the stake, like the vision I’d had back at the contest. This time, though, the audience didn’t scream for her music. They screamed for her life.

Everyone said it was a miracle Dawn didn’t die. But she needed skin grafts and surgery. When I saw that burst of fire, I knew she was paying a terrible price for knowing Maddy.

And so was I. I couldn’t escape it any longer. Nothing terrible had happened to me. But I couldn’t help feeling I was still going to pay that price. I kept having those horrible dreams. I had to go back and face it, even if I wasn’t sure what it was.

The next day I got in my car and headed back toward Cornich. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do for Tim Malpas. But I had to find out.

It's a long drive. I got into town in the middle of the afternoon. There was no one I'd kept in touch with that I could stay with. I wouldn't have wanted to explain to anyone why I was there anyway. So, I went to a hotel in the center of town and asked for a room. The clerk gave me one on the fifth floor.

I hadn't brought much with me, just a case with shaving things and a clean shirt. I dropped it on the bed and sat down to think. Why was I here? What was I supposed to do?

Nothing told me. NO laughing, no fire, no howls. I began to feel a little foolish. Here I was in a place I didn't want to be, for a reason I couldn't pin down. I switched on the radio next to the bed. I heard: ". . . in stable condition in the burn unit of Chaney Memorial Hospital. Dawn," the newswoman went on, "who was injured when a microphone exploded into flames during her acceptance speech, was fortunate that help. . . ."

Help. The trigger word. I turned Off the radio and stood up. I put the room key in my pocket and walked out the door. The elevator reminded me of the one I'd met Rhonda in. In another world.

Outside, I walked toward Main Street. When we were growing up, Main Street was the center of the universe. Now, it seemed dinky. In the years I'd been away, a lot of the stores I remembered had closed. Some were boarded up. Others had new signs, but they looked cheap and small.

I turned onto Memorial Street. It led to the fountain. The fountain was a war memorial to the men who were killed in World War I. It was a big marble bowl, with water coming out of the mouth of a bronze eagle in the middle. The water splashed into the bowl, making a pool. It was pretty deep. When we were kids, we used to swim in it, until we got caught.

As I got nearer to the fountain, I heard loud, angry voices. A few more steps, and I saw two men facing each other. A crowd had gathered, cheering them on: One of the men looked rather ordinary. The other was wearing a dark, hooded cape that hid his face and hands. I knew who had made that cape. My mother had, before we left for Clifton. A beat-up car was parked at the curb near the fountain. I knew the car, too. It was Tim's, the one Cara said had been stolen.

That's what Tim was shouting about. "That's my car! You stole it from me!"

The other man yelled back, "You're crazy, you dirty freak! That's my car! Go back where you came from!"

The crowd roared with delight. The man moved in on him. Tim backed up, all the way to the rim of the fountain. "Get away from me," he yelled. "Thief! Car thief!"

The man reached and grabbed Tim's poncho at the throat. He tore the material downward. The crowd whistled and applauded. The man gave a last hard rip and the cape fell off Tim's shoulders. The crowd was shocked. All of them gasped. For there Tim stood, covered with the filth of five years.

The man was so mad that even the sight of Tim didn't stop him. He rushed forward and pushed Tim hard. Tim lost his balance and fell backward into the water. "There, take a bath, you monster," the man cried.

The crowd picked up the cry. "Take a bath, monster! Take a bath, monster! Take a bath!" It turned into a chant. They stamped their feet and clapped their hands to the rhythm. "Take a bath, monster! Take a bath, monster!"

"Tim!" I called, but my voice was drowned out by the chanting. I tried to get through the crowd to help him. No one would give way. For a moment, I was afraid Tim had drowned in the fountain. Then he surfaced, trying to pull himself up by the wet stone rim. The crowd stopped chanting. There was a stunned silence. The water had not washed away one drop of paint, one stripe of green.

Tim managed to scramble out. Even the man who pushed him fell back. Tim looked at him through the dripping water and streaming paint, and shouted one more time, "Thief!" He seemed to be leaping toward the man. But instead, he ran past them all and jumped into his car. The thief had made the same mistake Tim had. He had left the keys in the ignition. Tim started the car and sped wildly away.

Somebody cried, "Call the cops!" The thief didn't want the police, but he couldn't say that. "He won't get far," he said, "I was almost out of gas." A girl from the crowd ran to a coin telephone in a booth near the fountain. Part of the crowd followed her. They stood near the phone, adding their two cents worth to what she was telling the police.

The cops in Cornich aren't the fastest in the world, and it was 20 minutes before they got there. I hung around, not knowing what to do. I supposed Tim had driven home. I was sure he hadn't seen me, and I didn't want him to know I'd been at the scene at the fountain.

The police listened to all the stories about a monster, a stolen car, low gas, and all the rest. One cop said, "Well, we better check out the car." After all these years, they knew where the town freak lived. They climbed back into their squad car and headed in the direction of Tim's street. The street where I'd grown up, too.

I knew a back way, and I took it so the cops wouldn't see my car following theirs. It took a little longer, and they were on Tim's lawn when I drove past. I slowed enough to hear one of them say, "No car . . . not in the garage, either." Another of them had a hand radio. I heard him start to give a description of the car and the impossible description of Tim. "Warn motorists not to pick him up. He may run out of gas and try to hitch. He's nuts, may be dangerous," he said. "We'll start the search." I drove on.

Without thinking, really, I drove out toward

Iron Hill. Halfway there, I saw Tim's old car, empty, on the side of the road. I parked in back of it, and looked inside. Nothing. So, now I knew where Tim was. It was as clear to me as if he'd left a note. He had hiked up to the cave. The trouble was, the cops would find the car, too. That meant they'd be headed in the right direction.

I got back in my car and drove the rest of the way. Tim wasn't anywhere on the road, but he'd have had time to get halfway up the hill by now. When I got about half a mile from the foot of the hill, I hid my car as well as I could in some bushes. Even if the police found it, they wouldn't have any reason to think of Tim. But I wasn't in a mood to take chances.

The climb was rough. My thoughts were rougher. I was like a computer whose memory bank has gone crazy. All the stuff I'd tried not to think about for years was spinning around, full of questions and doubts. I tried to stop it, but it wasn't any use. Finally, I reached the mouth of the cave. It was still almost invisible. But I knew where it was. I climbed the last few feet, and stopped.

"Tim?" I called. No answer. I called again.

"Go away!" said a voice, so close to my ear it made me jump.

"Tim?" I said. "Buddy, it's me, Jeff Ring, Look. . . ."

"Go away," said the voice. It wasn't Tim's voice. Even in five years, Tim's voice couldn't have changed that much.

"Please, is Tim Malpas here?" I asked. I was scared. Suppose this character had hurt Tim, or killed him? Tim's voice answered me.

"I'm here," he said. "Jeff, go away. I don't owe you anything, but listen to me—go." I couldn't go. The cave was like a spider web. My feet would move in only one direction, forward. My body would not turn. My eyes wanted to see only one sight—the stone walls of the cave on Iron Hill, and the little stream running through the rocks. I bent my head, and straightened up inside the cave.

"You fool!" Tim said. He stood beside the cave mouth. The paint stood out on his hair, and the green stripes crossed the only smooth skin I could see. He was stripped to the waist, as he'd been when the poncho was torn off. His body was spattered with yellow paint, and blood, and new stains I couldn't place. He was

horrible. But he wasn't the worst.

Tim was not alone in the cave. Sitting near the stream was a creature whose head had been dipped, not in paint, but in tar. And over the tar was a red cream that flowed to his rag- covered shoulders. Against the other wall was what had once been a woman, I think. She was soaked in liquid silver, something like aluminum. It gleamed in the light of the bare bulb that was wired up on the stone ceiling. Her hands were twisted, her fingers glued together by something dark and thick.

Deeper into the cave, I made out a shadow that seemed all purple. Whatever had spilled over this once-human body had caked it in crooked drippings like wax from a candle. I wanted to be sick. I couldn't look at any of them, yet wherever my eyes turned, there was another. Then, a voice said, "Welcome." It was a voice I knew.

The cave had many rooms. Out of one of them stepped Maddy Alder. She moved toward me as if on velvet wheels. She was five years older, and so beautiful that even there I was struck with wonder. She wore a dress that was amber-colored, like her skin—a glow of dark

gold.

Maddy laughed. It was the quiet, deadly laugh I'd heard so many times when she was nowhere near. Now, she was near, and the sound cut into my flesh and reached my bones.

"Tim!" I croaked.

"They're all mine," Maddy said. "All mine." She reached out a golden hand toward me.

All the courage left in me burst out. I screamed at the beautiful golden creature, standing like a princess, with her vile slaves clinging to the stone walls. "You are the ugliest creature on earth!" I cried. "Compared to you these—these—people are beautiful!" I turned, somehow breaking the pull of the cave, and ran out into the air. The sad, filthy beings began to howl. I ran down the side of Iron Hill, as fast as I could run. Once I tripped and fell on my hands and knees, but I scrambled up and ran again.

The howling grew fainter as I made it to the bottom of the hill. I was panting for breath when I reached my car. I tore the door open, jumped in, and drove into town as if one of the monsters was after me.

Somehow, I had the sense to give my car to

the hotel parking garage man. I dug the room key out of my pockets, but I couldn't stand still to wait for the elevator. I ran up the five flights of steps and down the carpeted hall. I jammed my key into the lock, leaped into the room, and slammed the door behind me. A little night table was near the door, and I pushed it under the lock. It was silly, but all I could think of was, "Did she follow me?"

I threw myself on the bed, shaking and crying. Yet, deep down, I felt freer than I had for days. I had tried to help Tim Malpas. He was beyond my help, or anyone else's. He would live in that community of horrors in the cave in Iron Hill. Maybe it was better that way. He had friends. Then, the sickness of that kind of thought swept over me. *Better that way! Friends!*

My hands were dirty from the fall. I went into the bathroom and unwrapped one of the little bars of hotel soap. I turned on the water, worked up a lather, and scrubbed my hands. I said to myself that I was washing my hands of Tim Malpas, and Maddy Alder, and everything to do with them both. There would be no more cave, no more Cornich, no more past. I'd go

back to New York and Rhonda, and forget it all forever.

My hands were beginning to sting. I reached for a towel with the hotel name printed on it and dried them. The bathroom light was on. Starting back to the bedroom, I put a hand up to flip the switch. And I froze in horror. The dirt had not washed off my hands.

Super Specter™

The Man Who Couldn't Come Clean

Tim Malpas's body was filthy with stains. He really hated that streak of mustard all over his arm. But no amount of washing would help. He was stained for life. The people of Cornich no longer felt sorry for him. They now called him the "town horror show." Well, he couldn't come clean. A beautiful stranger named Maddy Alder had fixed him—for good. Who was she? And what were her magic powers?

Fearon Education
a division of
David S. Lake Publishers
500 Harbor Boulevard
Belmont, CA 94002

ISBN-0-8224-6403-9